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ABSTRACT

Collaborative, participatory, and empowerment research (D. Fetterman and others, 1996) presents particular challenges and special rewards for evaluators working with children. This paper describes some of what one evaluator learned from the process of designing and using in data collection and analysis a structured interview for children (ages 5-14) involved in School Age Child Care projects in Ohio's urban districts. From the rich variety of children's responses to the questions "What time do you leave home in the morning to come here" and "What time do you get home from here?," the patterns in the data led the evaluator into rewarding explorations of: (1) the cultural constructions of time (A. Gell, 1992; R. Levine, 1997; Bloch, 1998) and (2) the ways children's voices can become part of evaluation products and presentations in ways that empower both the children and the programs in which they participate. (Author/SLD)

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From *When the Bell Say* to *In the Almost Dark:* Learning from Children's Concepts of Time

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Abstract

Collaborative, participatory, and empowerment research (Fetterman et. al., 1996) presents particular challenges and special rewards for evaluators working with children. This paper describes some of what one evaluator learned from the process of designing and using in data collection and analysis a structured interview for children (ages 5-14) involved in School Age Child Care projects in Ohio's urban school districts. From the rich variety of children's responses to the questions:

What time do you leave home in the morning to come here? and

What time do you get home from here?

the patterns in the data led the evaluator into rewarding explorations of: (1) the cultural constructions of time (Gell, 1992; Levine, 1997; Bloch, 1998) and (2) the ways children's voices can become part of evaluation products and presentations in ways that empower both the children and the programs in which they participate.

Background

This paper is the result of examination and reflection on one small part of the data collected during an evaluation of school age child care in the urban school districts of Ohio. That two year collaborative evaluation focused data collection in 10 of 108 sites, and involved:

- participant observation;
- artifact collection;
- field notes;
- structured observations of children's activities and adult-child interactions;

- interviews with child care staff members, parents, teachers, and children; and
- questionnaires completed by parents, child care staff members, teachers, and children.

Early in the process of interviewing five to 14 year olds, I (the evaluator) relearned what I had known as an English teacher – that much richer, more contextualized and detailed information could be obtained from children if they could *talk* rather than *write* their responses to questions. So, after the first experience of using the questionnaire as an instrument on which children wrote their answers, I began using the questionnaire as a one-on-one interview, asking children the questions and writing down their answers for them. Children of all ages seemed pleased by the one-on-one attention and much richer data resulted.

I had pilot tested the questionnaires I wrote for teachers, parents, child care workers and elementary-school age children, working with one child care center that operated from 6 a.m. until school began at 8:00 a.m. Maybe it was my own sleepiness at 6 a.m., when it was still dark outside, the child care room was a gloomy, windowless basement, and the only people truly awake were the children, but I didn't recognize that some of my questions were truly perplexing or simply meaningless to young children. Some of 10 child care sites selected for intensive data collection operated in the early morning hours; some operated after school and were open as late as 11 p.m., and others were open both before and after school. One of the things I wanted to collect data on was the length of children's day, and so I asked the children, in the questionnaire, what time they left home in the morning and what time they got home from the child care center in

the afternoon or evening. In this way, I hoped to compare the length of their days – simply to learn how long were they away from home each weekday.

By the way, some of the children I observed and interviewed were away from home from 5 a.m. until after 11 p.m., five days a week, throughout the school year. They were at home for meals only on weekends and most were not home during the week for television, video games, outdoor play, or any activities other than sleeping, bathing, and getting dressed and undressed. During the winter, this meant that the children left home in the dark, got back home in the dark, and were outside only if weather and urban neighborhood conditions permitted outdoor recess time during school hours or during child care hours. There are all kinds of ramifications of a child's day being that long, and all kinds of issues involved in so little contact with parents and other family members five days a week, but this paper is focused on one issue – children's concepts of time.

As people who work regularly with young children know, and as I learned, "clock time" is not only a recent cultural construction, it is a construction of adults in industrialized nations. While social studies books explain that it was the railroad that brought about the need for Americans to standardize time, for centuries before the railroads and other manifestations of industrialization, human beings had operated on what might be termed 'event time.'

> In a world where time cannot be measured, there are no clocks, no calendars, no definite appointments. Events are triggered by other events, not by time. A house is begun when stone and lumber arrive at the building site. The stone quarry delivers stone when the quarryman needs money .... Trains leave the station ... when the cars are filled with passengers.... Long ago, before the Great Clock, time was measured by changes in heavenly bodies; the slow sweep of stars across the night sky, the arc of the sun and variation

> in light, the waxing and waning of the moon, tides, seasons. Time was measured also by heartbeats, the rhythms of drowsiness and sleep, the recurrence of hunger, the menstrual cycles of women, the duration of loneliness. (Lightman, pp 150-151)

I learned from my glimpses of how time was viewed by the children. Many of the young children I observed and interviewed operate on this *event time* and haven't yet internalized the 'clock time' of their elementary schools. Their day, as they describe it, is marked by events: when the bus comes; when they have breakfast; when it gets light outside; when they have recess outside; when lunch is served; when they transition from school to child care; when they are picked up; when they get home; when they have dinner; and when they go to sleep. Five and six year olds were able to describe all of these events, and many more, with almost no reference to 'clock time.' During my summer data collection visits, the 5 and 6 year olds could describe how they hated to go to bed in the summer, when it was still light outside. This brought back my own memories of the Robert Louis Stevenson (1999, revised edition) poem that captured my childhood feelings about going to bed when it was still light. Stevenson wrote:

Bed in Summer

In winter I get up at night
And dress by yellow candle-light.
In summer quite the other way,
I have to go to bed by day.
I have to go to bed and see
The birds still hopping on the tree,
Or hear the grown-up people's feet
Still going past me in the street.
And does it not seem hard to you,
When all the sky is clear and blue,
And I should like so much to play,
To have to go to bed by day?

When I asked children when they got up, they would often use nature to explain. They got up when it was "a little dark" or "a lot dark" outside, or "whened the sun comed up." Similarly, when I asked them when they got home from child care, they responded not with 'clock time' but with descriptions of the natural light: "in the too late to play outside" or "in the way dark" or "in the so dark that not many cars are in the streets and not many lights are in the houses." The sun and darkness were the most common time markers children mentioned. Television programs were a distant runner up, as some children answered "I get home when MASH comes after the news." (11:30 p.m.) or "When I come home, cartoons are on and Jerry Springer, but I'm not allowed to watch Jerry Springer" (4:00 p.m. to those on clock time). Often, children could tell me what program was on television when they got home, but could not tell me what time that program was on television. I learned to pick up a local paper, so I could translate the programs that were on television when they left home and the programs they saw when they got home, into 'clock time.'

Five year olds, new to school and probably new to being interviewed, seemed flattered by the one-on-one attention and appeared to give serious thought to the questions I asked them. Their answers to questions seemed uncensored, and for me, refreshing. For example, I asked one five year old, Josh, how he woke up in the morning for school. He looked at me blankly. I said – "Does the sunlight wake you up? Does an alarm clock wake you up? Does a person wake you up?" His face lit up, he stood, and said loudly: "My mom wakes me up. She yells 'Josh, get your ass out of bed and get ready for school!'" I got similar responses from other children, but only from five year

olds. Even by first grade, children seemed to learn to self-censor these first-person accounts of their home lives.

As I reread and coded my data after each day in a child care site, I was struck by two things in particular – first, this kind of uncensored description of home life, and second, the sense of time by natural events like sunrise and sunset that preceded digital clocks, personal professions of wrist watch wardrobes, piercing school bells, and all the other clock-related paraphernalia of time that surrounds most working Americans. I searched the early childhood literature, looking for explanations of how young children view time. In this, as in so many areas, Vivian Paley (1981) proved a valuable resource. In explaining how 5 year olds think, she comments:

> We are surrounded by numbers – on calendars, scales, thermometers, clocks, and rulers – but these carry little information about measurements for young children. Numbers are a source of confusion if used for teaching science or math concepts. Light and heavy, cold and warm, minutes and hours, short distances or long – these measures are understood only within the context of action. Children do not grasp their meaning through numbers (Paley, pp-101-2).

The more I read, the more I was convinced that children view time the way our early ancestors did, and the way time is still viewed in some cultures. Social psychologist Robert Levine describes the differences between cultures that operate on clock time and those that operate, like young children, on event time.

> ...life on clock time is clearly out of line with virtually all of recorded history. And it is not only from a historical perspective that these temporal customs are so deviant. Still today, the idea of living by the clock remains absolutely foreign to much of the world.
>
> One of the most significant differences in the

> pace of life is whether people use the hour on the clock to schedule the beginning and ending of activities, or whether the activities are allowed to transpire according to their own spontaneous schedule. These two approaches are known, respectively, as living by clock time and living by event time. The difference between clock and event time is more than a difference in speed, although life certainly does tend to be faster for people on clock time. (Levine, pp.81-82)

This thinking about 'clock time' v. 'event time' sent me back to my field notes. There, again and again, conflicts between young children and adult care takers and differences of opinion between adult care takers could be read and understood as differences between persons who operate on 'event time' and persons who operate on 'clock time.' The most conflicts occurred when these two kinds of adults worked together in a child care setting. For example, in some child care centers, there had been deliberate efforts to hire the mothers of young children, women who had been on welfare and were now part of the welfare-to-work reform effort. These young mothers had been at home with young children for several years, had not had jobs outside the home, and tended, in their own descriptions of their daily lives, to be persons who operated on event time. Important times in their lives included the time of the month their welfare check arrived, the time of the month the rent was collected, the time of day that the snack van came through their project's streets, the times their favorite 'stories' were on afternoon television, the time to leave for church, the times their older children came home from school.

The other adults in the child care sites were often teachers or YMCA/YWCA employees, middle-class persons who operated largely on clock time: school schedules,

work schedules, shift change times, medicine-dispensing times, children's arrival and departure times. This experience with operating almost constantly on clock time led them to schedule children's time in child care in the same way, rotating children from one activity to another every 10 or 15 minutes for example. This rigid kind of to-the-minute scheduling for activities like a computer game were inexplicable to both young children and to the welfare-to-work moms. Nothing in the home cultures of these moms or the children prepared them for the strictly clock-based movement from one event to another.

When teachers were not in the room, the rhythm of the activities often changed; children worked with a computer game until they finished the game, then moved to a puzzle area until the puzzle was completed, then moved to a reading area until they finished a story book, etc. During these times, there were almost no conflicts between children and adults, and almost no use of punishments like 'time out' for not following adult directions. Directions to leave an unfinished drawing, an unfinished story or an unfinished computer game made no sense to the children. They would protest and their protest would often turn into an argument with an adult or a fit of anger or frustration, culminating in a punishment, frequently 'time out' in a corner away from all activities. These rapidly escalating situations, which I observed and they had described for me later by the children or by the moms, simply made no sense to the children or to the moms. They were operating in a culture very different from their home cultures, impacted by rules that followed 'clock time' rather than nature's clock or the rhythms of events and activities.

> When we enter the web of culture, answers come neither simply nor cleanly. Cultural beliefs are like the air we breathe, so taken for granted that they are rarely discussed or even articulated.

> But there is often a volatile reaction when these unwritten rules are violated. . . . No beliefs are more ingrained and subsequently hidden than those about time. Almost thirty years ago anthropologist Edward Hall labeled rules of social time the "silent language." The world over, children simply pick up their society's conceptions of early and late; of waiting and rushing; of the past, the present, and the future. There is no dictionary to define these rules of time for them, or for strangers who stumble over the maddening incongruities between the time sense they bring with them and the one they face in a new land."
> (Levine, 1997, pp.xv-xvi)

The silent language of rules of social time permeates child care hours. In most schools, children are exposed to rigid notions of time – to classes that begin at 8:07, lunch times that start at 10:21, and class periods that last 42 or 38 or 55 minutes. This kind of scheduling of people and events seems bizarre to an outsider, but like most cultural rules, it's virtually invisible to those who live intimately with such a clock-driven schedule over a period of time. Children and adults are impacted by the world around them and the world of America, to middle and upper class persons, is emphatically operated by clock time.

Levine (1997) and other social psychologists have noted that the more prosperous, the wealthier a nation, the more rigidly clock time rules daily activities. In poorer countries, event time dominates. In rural Mexico, for example, a morning appointment begins when both persons arrive; in the US business world, an appointment is expected to begin precisely a previously agreed-upon time. In these two situations, transportation to the meeting also differs. In the rural Mexican setting, the bus one takes to the meeting may not leave for the city until it is full of passengers. An American waiting on the

corner for the bus ride to an appointment expects the bus to pick up at a precisely scheduled time and to arrive near the scheduled appointment at a precisely scheduled time.

Perhaps by bringing our notions of clock time to the level of consciousness in teacher training, in training adults to work in child care settings, and in all work with young children, many problems that are the result of differences in the ways we view and use time can be minimized or avoided. We teach business persons to expect and to successfully operate within different cultural views of time. Why not bring the same awareness of clock time v. event time to persons who work with young children? We know that humans, like all primates, learn from play. Do we gain something by teaching 5 and 6 year olds, and children even younger than that in day care programs, to operate by clock time, when it is so contrary to their natural instincts? What do we gain by fighting those instincts and insisting that children follow a rigidly clock-determined schedule when such a schedule violates their natural rhythms? Should children's play be strictly regulated by clocks, or should play and the learning that result from it, to the extent that it's possible, be allowed to operate by event time, to "feel" when activities should begin and end?

Time, as discussed in this paper, is one small part of the data collection for this school age child care project. Yet, it is an example of the ways participatory evaluation data can be used to help those within a program to step back from their work and see ways that evaluation data can assist them in recognizing and solving problems. It's also a small example of the ways in which studying children's voices, children's responses to interview questions, can instruct and enlighten an evaluator.

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